

Confidential

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THE NIEMEN RIVER

SUMMARY

The Niemen or Memel River runs through the disputed areas of Vilna and the Memelland, and forms the pre-1939 boundary of Lithuania and Germany for part of its course. Access to the stream is difficult, and port facilities are poor. From Memel, which is reached by traffic from the Baltic through the Kurisches Haff, the Niemen is navigable for small boats upstream for 478 kilometers to the Polish-Lithuanian border and, for timber rafts, some distance into Polish territory. However, since the Niemen in Poland is connected with the internal waterway system of eastern Europe, it has potentialities for a somewhat greater volume of trade, depending upon political arrangements.

Before 1914, when the Niemen was an artery for Russian-German commerce, it carried only about a million tons of goods a year; in the decades between the two wars it carried far less traffic. It ceased to serve as an outlet for the Russian timber and grain trade. The Polish-Lithuanian border remained closed from 1923 to 1938. Lumber export underwent a decline, and the river served no populous areas or heavy industries. Despite a gradual increase in volume, the pre-1939 trade on the Lithuanian sector of the river was only ten to fifteen percent of the pre-1914 total. The trade through the Prussian port of Tilsit reached only one-third of its former volume. Of it the great majority has always consisted of timber and wood products, the remainder mostly of local traffic. A small but growing passenger traffic developed from Kaunas downstream.

The most important commercial part of the Niemen system is the bay into which it flows - the Kurisches Haff - with its three principal ports: Memel, Lankupiai and Rusne. Along this coast moved about a million tons of goods a year, again mostly lumber.

On the Polish sector of the river there was only a trickle of trade, amounting to about 100,000 tons of timber going to points away from the river and about as much again for purely local traffic. This low level of activity persisted throughout the pre-1939 period, despite the fact that the river Niemen is connected by canals with the Vistula on the west and the Pripet on the east.

I. GEOGRAPHICAL

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I. GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS

1. Location and Course of the Niemen

The Niemen (or Memel) river flows for nearly its whole length through disputed territories: Vilna, Memelland, and Lithuania. Under the 1923 to 1938 boundary, it rose in the Soviet Union, traversed the lower part of Poland's Vilna territory, the southernmost corner of Lithuania, southern Lithuania and Memelland (where it formed the boundary with East Prussia) and flowed into the Kurisches Haff, and thence into the Baltic Sea. The recent history of these areas has been a turbulent one. The Vilna area was seized by Poland in 1920. Memelland was taken by Lithuania from the Allied Powers in 1923 and retaken by Germany in 1939. In 1939 the Polish section of the river was appropriated by Russia, and the Lithuanian part in 1940.

2. Navigability of the Niemen

The Niemen is navigable for small ships and timber rafts from the Polish-Lithuanian border to Memel, a distance of 478 kilometers; in practice, until 1938 it was used only on the 220-kilometer stretch from Kaunas to Memel. Boats of up to 400 tons' displacement can proceed as far as Kaunas during the ice-free period from April to November. The port of Memel has the great advantage of being an ice-free port.

The Niemen is not suited, however, for large-scale transportation development. Below Kaunas and nearly to Memelland its banks are lined with cliffs which make access to the river difficult. In Upper Memelland navigation is impeded by rapids, in lower Memelland by shifting sand bars. It does not require extensive regulatory works, however.

3. Ports of the Niemen

The principal Niemen River ports in Poland are the city of Grodno (population 50,000 in 1931) and the town

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of Augustów (population 12,000 in 1931) located on the Augustów Canal connecting tributaries of the Niemen and the Vistula.

In Lithuania the principal Niemen River ports are Kaunas (population 152,365 in 1938), where the river Wilija joins the Niemen, and the city of Memel (population 47,189 in 1938). Between these cities are the river ports of Schmallengken (Smalininkai), the former German-Russian border station, and the town of Russ (Rusne), where the Niemen enters the Kurisches Haff. The port of Lankupiai is on the shore of the Kurisches Haff. Both these last-mentioned towns are under 2,000 in population.

Between the two wars Germany had possession of the left bank of the river as it flowed along the boundary of East Prussia through Memelland. The port of Tilsit, together with nearby Ragnit, was the principal German port on the river.

The Niemen in Poland is linked by connecting canals with the Vistula and the Pripet Rivers, to the west and east. The connection with the Pripet is made by the Ojinski Canal from the Szczara tributary of the Niemen to the Pripet. The Augustów Canal links the Niemen and the Narew Rivers just south of the former Polish-Lithuanian border; the Narew in turn flows into the Vistula.

II. VOLUME OF TRAFFIC

The Niemen has never been a great artery of trade, but it has had a certain importance for local industry and for the lumber trade. The value of the Niemen for the region it serves is best illustrated by the data of the pre-1914 era, when it was mainly used in the Russo-German timber trade. The prosperity of Memel and of Tilsit was bound up with the lumber trade, both through its lumber and cellulose mills and its export trade. Along the Kurisches Haff there was also a considerable number of saw mills.

After 1923 Lithuania developed some passenger and goods trade, which showed a steady growth but never

attained

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attained first-rate importance. River traffic was sharply curtailed by the closure of the Polish-Lithuanian border, which remained in force until 1938, and by the slight development of industry in Lithuania. Besides lumber, the chief items of river traffic were coal, stone and some grainstuffs.

1. Pre-1914 Traffic

The figures for goods passing through the German-Russian border station of Schmallengken before 1914 show that imports from Russia in the ten years preceding the outbreak of war regularly averaged just under a million metric tons, of which 97 percent was lumber. The balance was made up of grain and a small amount of stone. Exports to Russia were negligible, varying from six to twenty thousand tons, principally coal. Ship traffic averaged about 5000 vessel stops a year. Approximately 87 percent of the timber came by timber rafts.

TABLE I

Traffic at Schmallengken 1901-1914 1/

(in metric tons)

	<u>Export</u>	<u>Imports from Russia</u>	
		<u>Goods</u>	<u>Timber Rafts</u>
1901	5,200	123,100	511,700
1902	5,900	121,600	411,500
1903	10,400	116,800	690,700
1904	11,600	163,500	734,700
1905	6,300	211,500	702,600
1906	10,900	248,000	918,500
1907	18,100	184,300	984,100
1908	17,200	249,500	554,800
1909	13,100	381,800	708,200
1910	19,900	286,700	702,500
1911	23,300	265,117	706,143
1912	28,800	358,000	737,971

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1/ Statistisches Jahrbuch, 1907, 1910; Statistik des Deutschen Reichs, vols, 255, 265.

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A considerable part of this trade was directed to Tilsit, through which it entered East Prussia. In the four years 1909-1912 an average of about 4000 calls were made by ships carrying an annual average of about 330,000 tons to this port. Ninety percent of this trade was carried in German boats.

TABLE II

Ship Traffic at Tilsit, 1909-1912 2/

	<u>Number of ships</u>	<u>Tons of freight</u>
1909	3,365	331,698
1910	4,983	343,754
1911	4,254	331,101
1912	3,870	334,335

At that period there were no other ports between Tilsit and Memel important enough to appear in German statistical tables. Passenger traffic was so slight as not to figure in the official German statistics.

2. Traffic Within Lithuania

The marked change which occurred in the character of Niemen River traffic in the post-war years was due in part to the creation of an independent Lithuania, but even more to the cessation of the former timber trade from the Polish and Russian hinterland. The latent state of war between Lithuania and Poland closed their common boundary between 1918 and 1938, when the Poles brought about its reopening by ultimatum. During the years of closure the export of Russian timber was diverted to Leningrad and Riga. 3/ Moreover, the Lithuanian timber trade was hard hit in the depression. Its weakness was due partly to poor marketing and shipping facilities, and partly to the poor quality of its timber. 4/ All these factors contributed to changing the nature of the river traffic. The principal trade developed between Kaunas and Memel consisted of passenger traffic and a small but steady flow of merchandise.

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2/ Statistisches Jahrbuch, 1910, 1914.

3/ Ian Morrow, German-Polish Borderlands, (Oxford 1936), 443.

4/ H. G. Wanklyn, The Eastern Marchlands of Europe (London, 1941), p.128

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The sweeping change in the Niemen trade is shown by the small amount of timber floated on the whole river in Lithuania which reached a peak of 184,473 cubic meters in 1937. For the most part the total annual trade stagnated at about 120,000 cubic meters annually. This is in contrast with annual totals of around a million tons before 1914.

TABLE III

TIMBER FLOATED ON NIEMEN AND TRIBUTARIES 5/
IN LITHUANIA 1928 - 1937

	<u>Logs</u> (cubic meters)	<u>Wood for Paper pulp</u> (meters)	<u>Firewood</u> (meters)
1928	22,116	2,553	7,516
1929	75,343	13,590	9,078
1930	62,133	15,739	9,003
1931	64,914	916	3,197
1932	70,591	4,323	21,946
1933	125,418	7,065	3,374
1934	123,901	22,765	7,900
1935	121,396	88,000	10,864
1936	133,088	15,735	35,444
1937	184,473	49,084	14,730

The amount of merchandise carried on the river and the Kurisches Haff was rather slight despite the steady increase that brought the tonnage volume from the 1932 figure of 468,000 up to the 1938 peak of 1,818,000 tons. Two-thirds of these amounts were accounted for by timber and wood products. The bulk of the tonnage was handled by the ports of Memel, Lankupiai and Rusne (Russ) along the Kurisches Haff. Memel was the largest port, handling 554,000 tons of the 1938 total. The other ports along the shore were not far behind in volume of

5/ Annuaire Statistique de Lithuanie, 1927-1937. river

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river traffic, Rusne, at the mouth of the Niemen, handling 500,000 tons in 1938. Each of these ports handled from three to four hundred thousand tons a year from 1934 on, the bulk of which was timber or wood products.

The largest Lithuanian port on the river was Smalininkai (Schmalleningken) which carried its greatest volume in 1934 with 162,000 tons and in the years thereafter averaged around 140,000 tons. Usually somewhat more than half of this trade was downstream traffic and lumber comprised half of that. Minerals, including coal, comprised about twenty percent of the upstream traffic; no significant volume of other goods was carried. Kaunas, the terminal for river shipping, handled only 94,000 tons at the 1938 peak, two-thirds of this being in the timber trade. This total was a sharp increase over the 52,000 ton total of 1932. 6/

This weakness in river shipping particularly noticeable since the railroad and highway facilities from the capital to Memel were quite inadequate until a railroad was completed from Telsai to Kretinga in 1938. A hard-surfaced road between Kaunas and Memel was also completed only in 1938.

One new development on the river was the passenger trade which increased steadily throughout the 1930's. Passenger service was most developed between Kaunas and Smalininkai, a distance of just under 100 kilometers. It reached a peak of 334,500 passengers at the port of Kaunas in 1938. Although Kaunas was the principal terminal, the port of Russ (Rusne) handled in the neighborhood of 10,000 passengers in the last years' of Lithuania. Second in importance to Kaunas was Memel where river passenger traffic reached a peak of 120,000 in 1934. During the succeeding years the number of passengers there ranged around 80,000 each year with slightly more than half being downstream travelers. 7/

Comparison of pre-1914 and post-1918 trade figures for Schmalleningken are meaningless, as that town had ceased to be a frontier point and had become a small Lithuanian river port.

The change in the Niemen trade is again clearly shown by a comparison of trade figures for Tilsit which handled an average of 161,237 tons in the 1932-1937 period.

Although

6/ Ibid., 1933-1938.

7/ Ibid.

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Although this was a marked increase over the amount of traffic in the 1925-1932 period, it was about one-third the trade handled in the pre-1914 years. Basic causes of this drop in traffic were the decline in the timber trade and the cessation of the former trade with Russia through this port. 8/

Between the World War and 1928 no paper pulp wood was imported into Tilsit, although this had formerly been a principal item in its trade. After 1928 there were great fluctuations in the amount of pulp wood imported. The totals for this commodity ran from 1,236 tons in 1929 to a high of 197,169 in 1936. The average yearly paper pulp trade, 1932-1937, was 121,500 tons. About 25,000 tons of stone came into Tilsit each year, but very little else. A further reason for decline was that the cellulose factories' trade, which had formerly moved through this port, was deliberately sent through Königsberg, especially after 1933. 9/ The Nazis deliberately stopped exports through Tilsit as part of the economic pressure exerted on behalf of their claims on Memel. 10/

3. The Niemen in Poland

a. Pre-1914.--Before 1914 the course of the Niemen through the Polish provinces was an important route for sending Russian timber to the sea; the volume varied from one-half to a million tons of timber in rafts, as recorded at Schmallengken. A moderate trade in merchandise was carried on through the same port. Imports to Germany reached a peak in 1911 of 265,117 tons, while 23,306 tons were exported. This trade was carried in slightly more than 2,200 cargoes. 11/

b. 1918

8/ Arrangements had been made with the Germans in 1928 which provided national treatment on nationals in internal navigation and timber floating. Above Schmallengken this was reserved to Russia with Germans enjoying most-favored-nation status. Below that point timber for German destinations had to be floated by German watermen. This ended a long period during which no timber trade had been carried on between Lithuania and Germany.

Department of Overseas Trade, Economic Conditions in Lithuania in 1935, London 1936, p. 21.

9/ Morrow, op. cit., p. 443.

10/ Department of Overseas Trade, Economic Conditions in Lithuania in 1935, London 1936, p. 21.

11/ Statistik des Deutschen Reichs, vol. 255, p. 224.

b. 1918 to 1938.--Between the two wars the Niemen was not used for international trade, since the boundary was closed as a result of the Polish seizure of Vilna and Suvalki areas. Trade at the Polish ports of Grodno and Augustów stagnated. There was a small amount of local passenger traffic, averaging 12,000 passengers per year (1932-1936), practically all downstream from Grodno. The peak number of passengers carried was 14,352 (1936). During these years usually about 2,000 passengers embarked at Augustów. 12/

The Niemen was used for some local carrying of timber: annually between 160,000 and 200,000 tons were loaded on the Niemen and its branches between 1934 and 1936. About 75 percent of this timber was destined for some other point on the river or one of its tributaries. A small proportion of it--in recent years a little over 10 percent--went to Danzig and a somewhat smaller amount to points on the Vistula. 13/

The larger part of the timber handled in Poland was in the form of logs taken down the river in rafts, to be cut into lumber. The total amount of timber on the river was 204,000 tons in 1934, of which 147,942 was in logs for the saw mills along the Vistula. This was a normal proportion. The largest part of this timber came down the Sozara River tributary--119,315 tons in 1934, a peak year. The next most important tributary was the Augustów canal.

TABLE IV

12/ Poland, Statistique des transports, 1931-1936, p. 7.

13/ Ibid., p. 28.

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TABLE IV

Transport of Timber on Polish Niemen According to
Place of Loading and Types of Lumber, 1934-1936 14/

(in tons)

<u>Place of Loading:</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Lumber: Not Cut</u>	<u>Lumber: Cut</u>	<u>Firewood</u>
<u>Niemen and Branches</u>				
1934	204,100	147,942	14,062	42,186
1935	168,534	94,284	36,027	38,223
1936	191,653	131,940	25,898	33,815

Of the above, the chief branches contributed:

Szczara, Stolpce
and Tributaries

1934	119,315	94,383	7,351	17,581
1935	94,284	55,775	17,103	21,406
1936	111,523	90,211	11,494	9,818

Augustów Canal East
of Augustó

1934	46,882	31,189	6,050	11,643
1935	26,823	18,605	506	7,712
1936	40,060	21,382	4,890	13,788

The merchandise traffic on the Polish Niemen was negligible. In the best year (1936) six hundred tons were loaded; for several years the figure ran in the two hundred ton range, virtually all in local transit. The absence of populous areas and of any important manufacturing or mining activities prevented the building of a water born traffic.

c. Potential Value of the Polish Niemen.--The past record of the Polish section of the Niemen establishes the fact of its navigability, but in no way

indicates

14/ Ibid., p. 30.

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indicates its possibilities under other political conditions. Although the formerly extensive lumber trade may never be fully recaptured, because of heavy cutting over and the changed demand for wood, some recovery might be expected. A certain amount of merchandise traffic might be carried on, not only on the Niemen, but also through its canals connecting with the Vistula and the Pripet Rivers.

PS/TFPower, Jr./VVP/MHP/JRB